

January 20, 2006: Thornberry Previews 2006 Congressional Agenda

(Washington) In news conferences this week in Amarillo and Wichita Falls, Congressman Mac Thornberry (TX-13) outlined several significant issues to be considered in Congress this year.

Prevent Tax Hike

Thornberry said experience shows that Congress's efforts in recent years to stimulate the economy by reducing the tax burden on the American people have paid off. More than 4.5 million new jobs have been created since May of 2003 when the President signed the tax legislation known as the "Jobs & Growth Act." The number of Americans who own homes is at an all-time high, manufacturing activity has increased for 31 consecutive months, and real after-tax income per person has climbed by 7 percent since 2001.

"The best thing Congress can do for the economy is to allow people to keep more of the money they earn so that they can spend it on their families' needs instead of sending it off to the government," Thornberry said. "It is also important to give people some certainty and stability so they can plan."

Unless action is taken by Congress this year:

- Many middle income Americans will face a tax increase through the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT). Failure to extend the higher AMT exemptions will affect 19 million taxpayers in 2006.
- Texas residents will lose the right to deduct state and local sales taxes from their federal income taxes.
- "Above the line" deductions for higher education expenses and out of pocket teacher classroom expenses will not be allowed. (Above the line deductions can be claimed without having to itemize deductions.)
- Marginal oil and gas well producers will lose full benefit of "percentage depletion deductions."
- Lower income workers contributing to retirement accounts will not be allowed the "saver's tax credit."
- Taxes on capital gains and dividends will increase.

Thornberry is also hopeful that this year Congress will address the need for a major overhaul of the federal tax system to make it simpler and fairer.

Energy

Last year, Congress passed a major energy bill that promotes greater domestic development of many forms of energy including oil and gas, ethanol, wind, and nuclear. But, Congressman Thornberry says even more must be done to make our country less reliant on foreign energy. He supports allowing oil and gas production in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), encouraging construction of new refineries in the U.S. through regulatory relief and other measures, and funding research into new forms of energy and into more efficient use of existing energy sources.

Border Security and Immigration

Much work is needed this year on two issues Thornberry believes are directly related - border security and immigration.

The House began to address the issue of strengthening border security by passing a bill to hire additional border agents, improve technology and physical barriers along the border, and end the "catch and release" program by requiring all illegal immigrants apprehended at U.S. borders to be detained until their removal from the country.

"The safety of our nation is dependent upon us doing a better job of controlling who or what crosses our borders," Thornberry said.

As for immigration policy, Thornberry believes a guest worker program should be considered, but he is opposed to granting illegal aliens amnesty.

Global War on Terror

"Because Iraq is the central front in the war on terror, success there is critical to our national security" said Thornberry. "Our folks have done an incredible job, and we must give them all the support they need."

"Amazing progress has been made over the past year in getting Iraq back up on its feet. 2006 will be a critical year as the first permanent elected government takes office and we turn more security responsibilities over to them," Thornberry added.

The 13th Congressional District plays a significant role in our nation's defense through the presence of facilities such as Sheppard Air Force Base, Bell Helicopter, and the Pantex plant.

Thornberry believes Sheppard has a solid foundation for future growth because of the base's excellent facilities and strong community support.

"I will continue working with the Air Force and our community leaders to ensure that Sheppard remains a strong, vibrant contributor to our country's security," said Thornberry.

Thornberry is also committed to making sure that essential programs at Bell Helicopter and Pantex stay on track. Bell Helicopter is home to production of the V-22 Osprey, upgrading of the H-1 helicopter, and also plays a key role in building the new Presidential helicopter. Pantex is the only facility for assembly and disassembly within our nation's nuclear weapons complex.

Lobby Reform

As recent news has made abundantly clear, there is an urgent need for lobby reform in Washington.

The effort to develop reform measures is already underway in the House. Action is expected soon after lawmakers return to Capitol Hill.

"We should look for common sense reforms that make it less likely someone will abuse the system," Thornberry said.

Among items expected to be considered are:

- A ban on privately funded travel.
- Further restrictions on lobbying by former members and staff.
- A ban on former members convicted of a felony from receiving a Congressional pension.

"It may be true that Congress reflects the country - good and bad - but there should be a higher standard for those entrusted to represent the American people," said Thornberry.

Committee Assignments

Thornberry said he looks forward to continuing work in his committee assignments.

He is a member of the House Armed Services Committee, which oversees all matters related to the nation's defense including the defense budget, military operations, personnel training and weapons procurement. Thornberry also serves on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, where he chairs the Subcommittee on Oversight.

Thornberry is also serving on the Select Bipartisan Committee to Investigate the Preparation for and Response to Hurricane Katrina, which is expected to issue a report on its findings in February.

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